

## Grade 8 - Narrative

### Memories of a Friend

Abigail Matthews put her hand up to shade her eyes as she squinted at the wooden structure that seemed to be rising from the horizon ahead of her. “What is that place?” she asked her father.

“That’s Fort Kearny,” her father said from the seat of the wagon. “We’re going to stop there for two days and let the animals rest before we turn north.”

The Matthews family had left Tennessee in a wagon train with other settlers in early April. Most of the other settlers would continue on to Oregon, but Abigail’s father had purchased sixty-four acres of land along the South Loup River in the Nebraska Territory.

Everything the family owned was crowded into one small covered wagon, packed so tightly and so carefully that there was not a square inch of wasted space. Abigail’s mother had told her repeatedly that they could bring only things they absolutely needed. Her father had reiterated the dream that so many other westbound pioneers shared—a new life with more land than they could ever have hoped to own in the East.

Abigail had brought the things that were most important to her, including her favorite doll. Although she no longer played with dolls—for she felt she was much too mature to do so—this particular toy was one of her most precious possessions. The cloth-bodied doll with a porcelain head and hands was dressed in a ruffled, white blouse and a long, gray skirt. Its painted brown hair, blue eyes, and rosy cheeks reminded Abigail of her friend, Miriam, who had given her the doll as a gift when both girls were ten years old.

Abigail and Miriam had grown up on neighboring farms, and Abigail could not remember a time when they had not been friends. Abigail missed her friend and had been thinking about what she would say if she had a chance to see Miriam again. She had so much to tell her.

“Here we are,” Abigail’s father announced as they passed through the gates of Fort Kearny. “The fort is primarily a stopping point for travelers like us and a place for settlers, like we’re going to be, to purchase supplies and sell their goods,” he explained.

While her parents made arrangements to get feed for their oxen, Abigail walked around the fort. Like a bee to nectar, she was drawn to a corral full of horses. Oxen seemed such monotonous creatures when compared with the sleek, muscular horses, which always seemed ready to ride like the wind.

“They are reserved for special riders,” a girl’s voice said.

Abigail turned to see a girl her age, with hair and eyes as dark as hers, coming around a corner of the corral. "I wasn't going to bother them," Abigail stated. "Whose are they?"

"They're my father's—well, at least he takes care of them," said the girl. "He runs the general store and the Pony Express station here at the fort."

Abigail introduced herself and learned that the girl, whose name was Martha, had lived at the fort for two years. Martha helped look after her younger siblings, Trudy and Oscar, while their father worked in the store.

An idea had occurred to Abigail, and she was eager to find out if it was feasible. "The Pony Express comes through here?" Abigail asked.

"Yes, a rider going east is due at noon tomorrow," said Martha. "He will change horses here."

"Could I send a letter?"

"It will cost you two dollars an ounce, and anything over an ounce, no matter how little, counts as another ounce," explained Martha with authority.

Abigail didn't have money, and she knew her parents would not approve such an expense. Yet, she was not ready to give up her plan.

"If you want to send a letter," Martha said, "you'll have to have it at the general store by eleven o'clock tomorrow morning so we can weigh it and put it in the pouch. Those riders don't wait for anybody. That's how they get from San Francisco, California, to St. Joseph, Missouri, so quickly."

That night, by the light of the campfire, Abigail wrote a letter in which she shared all her thoughts and hopes with Miriam, just as if they were together on the bench behind the barn at her home in Tennessee. She described the horses in the corral at the fort and speculated about the Pony Express rider who would carry the letter as far as Missouri.

The next morning, Abigail went to the general store. She approached a man behind the counter and said, "My father said travelers sell their goods here. Will you buy something from me?" She handed the man a small, wrapped bundle.

The man carefully unwrapped the bundle and examined the blue-eyed, brown-haired doll. He peered at Abigail over the tops of his glasses. "This is a fine doll," he said, "but I have no use for it. I'm sorry that I cannot buy it from you."

Abigail's shoulders slumped, and she started to turn away from the counter when, from behind a bin of nails, she heard a familiar voice. "Trudy would love to have a

doll like that," Martha said to her father. "I believe such a fine gift would be worth at least two dollars."

Martha's father smiled at his understanding and intuitive daughter. He took two dollars from his cash box and handed them to Abigail, but she did not accept them.

"I believe two dollars will cover the cost of mailing this letter," she said, placing an envelope on the counter and smiling appreciatively at Martha.